

## ARTICLE

# World Literature and the Italian Literary Canon: From Elena Ferrante to Natalia Ginzburg

Silvia Caserta

University of St Andrews, GB  
[sc332@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:sc332@st-andrews.ac.uk)

---

Variously intended as a field of study, a paradigm, and/or a method of literary criticism, World Literature has in the last two decades become a central subject in literary studies. The current debate around World Literature is certainly central to the present and the future of the discipline of Comparative Literature. At the same time, as I show in this paper, a redefinition of World Literature, which would include a deeper understanding of both its risks and its potential benefits, can push us towards a revision of the canon(s) of our national literary traditions. Moving from Tim Park's assertion that the popularity of Elena Ferrante's "dull global novel" would contribute to obscuring more deserving authors – among whom he cites Natalia Ginzburg – this paper argues that Ferrante's literary success could, on the contrary, pave the way for a rediscovery of past writers within the Italian literary tradition. Through a comparison of Ferrante's *L'Amica Geniale* and Ginzburg's *La Strada che Va in Città*, the article shows how both works are, in Pheng Cheah's terms, "literature that worlds and makes a world", insofar as they foreground a world that is open and unstable, crucially caught between tradition and modernity, as well as the local and the global. Ultimately, both works call for a conception of World Literature that does not need to imply the loss of the local, but that can rather promote what Florian Mussgnug calls "responsible and responsive local sensitivity".

---

## Introduction: What Literature? And what World?

World literature can hardly be considered a new concept in literary criticism. The numerous recent scholarly discussions of world literature, and the multiple attempts at theorizing it from different perspectives, invariably link it back to Goethe's inaugural appraisal of *Weltliteratur* (1827) and to the equally celebratory remarks on the internationalization of literature that can be found in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (1848). And yet, it is impossible to deny that since the turn of the millennium, world literature, variously intended as a field of study, a paradigm, and/or a method of literary criticism, has become a central subject in literary studies. Seminal works by Franco Moretti (2000), David Damrosch (2003), and Pascale

Casanova (2004), in particular, have laid the foundations for what has now become a fertile area of scholarly inquiry and research.<sup>1</sup> Seen as a timely response to economic and cultural globalization, and as such praised as an attempt on the part of literary studies to cope with the global development of human and social sciences, world literature seems to be ideal for advocating literature's place and utility in the contemporary globalized world.<sup>2</sup>

But how so? In its proclaimed worldliness, world literature argues at its outset for a significant widening of traditional literary boundaries and aims at including in its scope all the literature in the world.<sup>3</sup> Such an ambitious gesture has not been exempt from criticism. Gayatri Spivak and Emily Apter, most notably, have long been voicing the risks associated with an overarching and unproblematic notion of 'the world' (which world literature seems at times to foreground) that would no longer account for specificity and difference.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this theoretical worldliness poses a number of challenges to both teaching and research practices, particularly in terms of institutional affiliations and distinctions. Whereas stand-alone world literature programmes have been established in various North American institutions, within the context of pre-existing disciplinary boundaries world literature is generally associated with comparative literature, hence institutionally paired with comparative literature programmes.<sup>5</sup> The UK academic system, where comparative literature tends to operate within or in association with modern languages departments, offers an appropriate context in which to reflect upon the relation between the new appeal of world literature and the persistent tradition and conceptualization of national literatures (and of their respective departments).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the current debate around world literature, on how to research and how to teach it, is certainly central to the present and the future of the discipline of comparative literature, as the latest American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) report suggests.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, as I show in this paper, a redefinition of world literature that would include a deeper understanding of both its risks and its potential benefits might help us reshape our own approach, as comparative literature scholars, to national literatures, while also pushing towards a revision of the canon(s) of our national literary traditions.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a useful review of the field, which includes an analysis of its origins as well as a discussion of its recent articulations, see David Damrosch, ed., *World Literature in Theory* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> It is better suited, perhaps, than other approaches and fields of study, such as postcolonialism and even comparative literature, as Mads Rosendahl Thomsen argues in his discussion of literary history and literary studies in light of global changes (see Thomsen 2008).

<sup>3</sup> And 'all the difference in the world', as the provocative title of Natalie Melas' intervention into the debate about the possibilities, and the limits, of comparison suggests (see Melas 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Emily S. Apter, *Against World Literature: on the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> There also seems to be a tendency in North America to replace Comparative Literature programmes with Comparative World Literature Programmes, as, for instance, at California State University, San Francisco State University, University of Illinois, and Kenyon College.

<sup>6</sup> This is definitely the case at the University of St Andrews, where the Comparative Literature degree programme is taught within the School of Modern Languages. Comparative Literature departments are also associated with Modern Languages in other institutions, such as Kent University and Queen Mary University of London.

<sup>7</sup> In her introduction to the 2017 ACLA report, 'Futures of Comparative Literature', Ursula K. Heise refers to world literature as one of the three main theoretical orientations within the current state of the discipline, together with literary theory and postcolonial theory. Moreover, Thomsen (2008) sees world literature as not necessarily in opposition to comparative literature but, quite significantly, as a 'correction of the way it [CL] is going' (p. 23). It is also noteworthy that the 'thorny issue of how to define "world literature" – alongside related questions of planetary thinking and the categorization of literature across existing national borders' is one of the key areas of inquiry of the *Modern Languages Open* comparative literature launch issue (see Bond: 2018).

<sup>8</sup> When referring to the canon, I am aware of the fact that the very notion of the canon is intrinsically problematic, and that as such it has been widely discussed both in the context of individual literary traditions and within the discipline of comparative literature. The lively nature of the debate, and its recent appeal, can be appreciated

While acknowledging the difficulties of theorizing and defining a literary canon, especially in the twenty-first century, I ultimately agree with Papadima, Damrosch, and D'Haen's assessment that the current 'debates do not dispense with canonicity altogether but make it more urgent and necessary'. Multiple and constantly revised versions of a single canon can still have both a practical function and a theoretical usefulness, insofar as they play a crucial role in orienting students' and scholars' approaches to different literary traditions. The gesture of questioning and revising canons is particularly urgent in the case of those literary traditions that prove to be conservative and resistant to change. I therefore intend to focus on the Italian context, where the literary canon still tends to be restrictive and coercive, rather than broadening and inclusive, and where, not by chance, world literature has not (yet) achieved as great a resonance as it currently enjoys in the anglophone world (but also, for instance, in Latin America and China).<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly perhaps, my discussion of world literature in relation to the Italian context will focus on Elena Ferrante, whose acclaimed *Neapolitan Quartet* has been approached as a work of world literature, and as such included in scholarly discussions of the concept and the field.<sup>10</sup> My intention here is to provide an analysis of Ferrante's work in relation to the current debate on world literature, on the one hand, and to the specific context of the Italian literary tradition, on the other. In particular, I will establish a link between the first volume of the so-called Neapolitan novels, *L'amica geniale*, and the short story 'La strada che va in città' by the twentieth-century Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg.

Ferrante's work has already been read in relation to that of previous Italian women writers, Elsa Morante in particular, but also Anna Maria Ortese.<sup>11</sup> However, a parallel between Elena

---

through the volume *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, edited by Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch, and Theo D'Haen (2011). Not only do the essays collected in the volume usefully chart theories and contexts of canonicity, but they also focus on the transformations and challenges in terms of canon formation that globalization has brought about.

<sup>9</sup> See Mariano Siskind's groundbreaking book *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), and also the very recent volume: Locane, Jorge J., Benjamin Loy, and Gesine Müller, *Re-mapping World Literature: Writing, Book Markets and Epistemologies between Latin America and the Global South = Escrituras, Mercados Y Epistemologías Entre América Latina Y El Sur Global* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), which aims at shifting dominant paradigms of world literature as centred on the relation between the West and the South as a whole. For contributions from the perspective of Chinese Studies, see Longxi Zhang, *From Comparison to World Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Tiziana de Rogatis, Stilian Milkova, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi organized an international conference on 'Elena Ferrante in a Global Context', which took place at Durham University on 7–8 June 2019, and where a shortened version of this paper was presented. For an entirely positive evaluation of Ferrante's work within a larger appraisal of world literature, see Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016). Pieter Vermeulen has also used Ferrante as a case study for his insightful reading of the role of Holocaust memory in articulating literary value today: see Peter Vermeulen, 'New York, Capital of World Literature? on Holocaust Memory and World Literary Value', *Anglia* 135.1 (2017): 67–85. Finally, it is interesting to note that the editors of *n+1* also refer to Ferrante as one example of what they define as 'internationalist literature', and that they see as the only valuable form of world literature (see 'World Lite,' editorial, *n+1* 17 (Fall 2013), 27 October 2019 <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/>>).

<sup>11</sup> Even if one had not noticed the curious assonance between the name Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante, Ferrante herself has highlighted her indebtedness to Morante's work in a number of interviews, and the North American press has explicitly defined Ferrante as the New Morante. Various parallels between the two Italian women writers have also been drawn by several literary critics: see Lucamante 2008; Patrizia Sambuco, *Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth Century Italian Women's Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Siriana Sgavichchia, *Il romanzo di lei: Scrittrici italiane dal secondo novecento a oggi* (Roma: Carocci, 2016). Sgavichchia also highlights significant interferences between Ortese's and Ferrante's work, whereas Ricciotti draws an explicit comparison between the two ('A Confrontation between Elena Ferrante and Anna Maria Ortese: The City of Naples, the Gateway, the Identity', *Zibaldone: Estudios Italianos* 4.2 (2016): 111–22). On the heavy intertextual references in Ferrante's work to both Morante and Ramondino (and on the fact that the author does not seem very keen to acknowledge any of these influences), see Lucamante 2018.

Ferrante and Natalia Ginzburg has not yet been drawn, at a time when Ginzburg's work has been receiving increasing critical attention, especially again in the anglophone world.<sup>12</sup> In the *New York Review of Books*, however, Tim Parks established an indirect connection between Ferrante and Ginzburg – a connection that is indeed relevant for my own purposes here. The British writer, translator, and literary critic has denounced the risks associated with a world market for literature, in which authors would intentionally simplify their writing for an international audience. As a result, according to Parks, writers of world literature end up producing what he defines as the 'dull global novel', while also overshadowing other much more deserving writers, among whom he mentions Natalia Ginzburg.<sup>13</sup>

Challenging Parks' remarks, I juxtapose in this paper Ferrante's and Ginzburg's works in order to highlight significant points in common between the two. Set in postwar Italy and written in the first person, both stories challenge traditional notions of autobiography and foreground the contradictions inherent in one's sense of self within a changing modern world.<sup>14</sup> Lucamante notes how contemporary women writers 'situate themselves as agents and spectators of their own existence at once' (2008: 14). In the case of Ferrante and Ginzburg, this 'hybrid' position extends from the writers to their female protagonists/narrators, whose individual experiences and individualized narrations illuminate women's collective identity and experiences in mid-twentieth century Italy.

My aim is to suggest that, in light of these correspondences and contrary to what Parks seems to fear, Ferrante's literary success can pave the way for a rediscovery and a renewed appreciation of Ginzburg's writing. On a broader level, this case study highlights how works of world literature, amongst which I include Ferrante's as well as Ginzburg's, create a space that is open and unstable, thus capable of offering alternatives to the world they describe. Interpreted in this way, works of world literature do not posit the loss of the local in favour of an enthusiastic embrace of the global. On the contrary, they give value to the interstitial space(s) in between the local and the global, so that, while belonging to a national tradition, they can open up a transnational perspective on this same tradition.

### Rethinking World Literature's Temporal and Spatial Boundaries

The comparison I make between *L'amica geniale* and *La strada che va in città* enables us to rethink our definition of world literature and to broaden its temporal boundaries. By using a writer of the twentieth century as one of the terms of the comparison, I propose a shift from the habitual focus in scholarly discussions of world literature on contemporary authors, where the adjective 'contemporary' seems to be applied only sporadically to pre-2000 works.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the comparison between Ferrante's and Ginzburg's work allows us to bring the concept of world literature back to its roots in modernity and in the cultural movement of modernism.

<sup>12</sup> See Angela M. Jeannet and Katz G. Sanguinetti, *Natalia Ginzburg: A Voice of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Teresa L. Picarazzi, *Maternal Desire: Natalia Ginzburg's Mothers, Daughters and Sisters* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002). See also recent editions of Ginzburg's work: Natalia Ginzburg and Wendell Ricketts, *The Wrong Door: The Complete Plays of Natalia Ginzburg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Natalia Ginzburg and Paul Lewis, *The Complete Short Stories of Natalia Ginzburg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011). Finally, see the recent and acclaimed new translation of Ginzburg's most famous work, *Lessico Famigliare*: Natalia Ginzburg, Jenny McPhee, and Peggy Boyers, *Family Lexicon* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Parks, 'The Dull New Global Novel', *The New York Review of Books*, 9 February 2010, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/>.

<sup>14</sup> On Ferrante's narrative strategies and her use of autofiction and metafiction, see Olivia Santovetti, 'Lettura, scrittura e autoriflessione nel ciclo de *L'amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante', *Allegoria* 73.

<sup>15</sup> This is the case in Debjani Ganguly's theorization of the contemporary global novel as originating after the crucial turning point of 1989. See Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Tracing back the origins of world literature to the emergence of (Western) modernity does not represent an entirely new direction. The work done by the Warwick Research Collective (WREC) in the attempt to theorize, following Franco Moretti's input, a world literary system, foregrounds the crucial link between modernity and world literature. In their conceptualization of world literature in terms of a 'combined and uneven development', the UK-based collective has, on the one hand, addressed modernity as 'both what world-literature indexes or is "about" and what gives world-literature its distinguishing formal characteristics' (17) and, on the other hand, pointed out the need to widen – backwards and forwards – the temporal delimitations of modernism, so as to ultimately remap 'both the history of modernism and the intertwined trajectories of world-literary wave formations' (19). In other words, as the WREC suggests, works of world literature are works that variously 'register' the world system, hence reacting to contexts and situations that might be different but that are usefully comparable. While the WREC's discussion focuses on anglophone literature, their theoretical gesture can significantly be extended to the Italian literary context, in which the category of modernism itself has been applied only belatedly and where the 'canon' of modernist authors is still quite restricted and gender biased.<sup>16</sup> As Katrin Wehling-Giorgi highlights in a recent intervention on *Allegoria*, the sensational success of Ferrante's work on the global literary market might be seen as a cultural achievement in itself, given the low visibility of Italian women writers within the canon of the European novel.

The narrow and conservative nature of the Italian literary canon that emerges here explains why this paper adopts a specific national perspective. Unlike many scholarly interventions in the field, my discussion of the potential benefits of world literature does not rely on a juxtaposition of Western literature, intended as a whole, and the literature of the rest of the world.<sup>17</sup> The methodological position of the WREC is again useful in this respect, as it highlights the different status, within the geopolitical entity we commonly refer to as 'the West', of different nations, languages, and cultural traditions. For this reason, it would be somehow reductive, but also misleading, to think of world literature only in terms of a post-European version of comparative literature, as Rey Chow, in particular, has argued.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as the WREC also point out, such a restrictive conception of world literature would run the risk of essentializing Europe, whereas Europe itself is far from being a homogenous space.

The focus on Italy, then, arises from the belief that using the concept of world literature to read the work of writers in this specific cultural and national tradition not only contributes to the current debate around world literature but also participates in the urgent discussion regarding the current and future place of Italian literature within a global literary market. It is scarcely an accident that the discussion of world literature does not seem to have entered Italian culture and academia in a way comparable to that of other countries. It is also noteworthy that relevant interventions in the field have either not reached Italy at all or have

<sup>16</sup> For the current debate on the importance of redefining and reassessing Italian modernism, see Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli, *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), but also the two very recent volumes: Massimiliano Tortora, *Il Modernismo Italiano* (Rome: Carocci, 2018); Luca Somigli and Eleonora Conti, *Oltre il canone: problemi, autori, opere del modernismo italiano* (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2018). For a specific discussion of the notion of Italian modernism in relation to comparative and world literature, see also Donata Meneghelli, 'Periodization, Comparative Literature, and Italian Modernism', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.7 (2013). For a broadening of the category of Italian modernism to women writers, see Rossella Riccobono, *Window on the Italian Female Modernist Subjectivity: From Neera to Laura Curino* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, the insightful discussion of the Western instrumental use of (world) literature 'as a source of cross-cultural understanding' that Gloria Fisk provides in her recent study of Orhan Pamuk's work and its reception (see Fisk 2018).

<sup>18</sup> See Chow, Rey. 'The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective.



failed to have a significant impact. Pascale Casanova's influential book on the emergence and development of an autonomous international literary field has not yet been translated into Italian, while Franco Moretti's equally influential work on the world literary system has not been as widely received in Italy as it has been abroad. Among the many recent articles and books whose titles feature world literature in association with a specific literary tradition, Italian literature does not figure as the second term.<sup>19</sup>

In a context that proves quite oblivious to current issues surrounding world literature, Tim Parks' current project at the International University of Languages and Media in Milan entitled 'Towards a Global Literature' might seem at first to represent a significant exception.<sup>20</sup> Although the project is unique in the Italian academic panorama, its specific aim casts some doubts on the true exceptionality of the gesture. As the opening question of the description reveals, the project aims at investigating the extent to which the 'new' – meaning the non-nationally bounded – audience that works of contemporary global literature imply affects 'content and style of what gets written'. In other words, here Parks reframes within an academic project the same doubts and anxieties towards the global novel he had already voiced in the *New York Review of Books*. In both cases, Parks' remarks seem to point to an unspecified literary value that 'world literature' puts at risk and that rather needs to be protected. If this is the case, it is hardly surprising that, in her recent contribution to the study of Elena Ferrante's work, Tiziana de Rogatis asks a rhetorical question: 'Chi ha paura di Elena Ferrante?'. In this short section of the introduction to the volume, De Rogatis refers to a plethora of gender-biased and aesthetically grounded reactions to Ferrante's works that inform the Italian publishing market, journalism, and academia alike, and that she denounces as 'puramente reattive, scomposte, se non addirittura fobiche' (19), hence intended again to defend an established, conservative, and predominantly male Italian literary canon.

This Italian 'fear' of world literature, which not by chance often translates into a resistance towards either Ferrante or, more generally, the contemporary global novel, might ultimately undermine any effort to deprovincialize and open up the Italian literary canon. On the contrary, we need to rethink the position of Italian literature within world literature, and the kind of world that this literature creates. Where does (or could) Italian literature stand in the canon/mode of reading/system of world literature? What role does it have to play, and what role does world literature play, in turn, within the context of Italian literature?

The critical paradigm that has emerged within the postcolonial debate around world literature provides a useful framework for my discussion. In his contribution to *The Routledge Companion of World Literature*, Robert Young draws a stark distinction between world literature and postcolonial literature, where the former implies a claim to universality, while the latter emerges as 'literature of resistance', as an oppositional gesture of 'writing back' (217). Young establishes a crucial link between postcolonial literature and the outside world, which in his words lies in postcolonial literature's 'combination of the subjective with the objective, the ability to articulate the ways in which larger historical events are felt on the pulses of the people who undergo them' (218). However, this link between literature and the world around it does not necessarily, I would contend, set postcolonial literature against world literature. As Pheng Cheah has shown, although again with reference to the literature of the postcolonial South, world literature can be seen as literature that addresses the globalized world, while at the same time offering alternatives to this world. The comparative analysis between Ferrante's novel and Ginzburg's short story will explore how Cheah's Heideggerian view of

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the Series 'Literatures as World Literature', edited by Thomas Beebee (Bloomsbury Academic), which includes studies of Danish, German, and Brazilian literatures, among others.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.iulm.it/wps/wcm/connect/iulmit/iulm-it/ricerca/progetti-di-ricerca/progetti-di-ateneo/letteratura-globalizzata>

world literature as 'literature that uncovers the world and opens up other possible worlds, thereby giving us resolve to respond to modernity's wordlessness and to remake the world according to newly disclosed possibilities' (129) can be extended outside a postcolonial context, within a Western literary world that is not as homogenous as both advocates and critics of world literature too often seem to assume. By reading *L'amica geniale* in the light of *La strada che va in città*, and vice versa, and assuming that the worldliness of the two works is intrinsic to the works themselves,<sup>21</sup> this paper shows how Ferrante and Ginzburg ultimately both 'register' (Deckard et al. 19) and 'uncover' the same, changing modern world, creating at the same time the possibility for an alternative to that world.

### **Making a World: The Local and the Global in *L'amica geniale* and *La strada che va in città***

We can now start our comparative analysis by focusing for a moment on Ferrante, whose novels have been read and praised as world literature, particularly in the anglophone world. But what is it that makes Ferrante's novels global novels? If, following one of David Damrosch's groundbreaking definitions, we conceive of world literature as a global system that comprises 'all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin' (4), Ferrante's work undeniably fits into this framework.<sup>22</sup> In 2015, her *Neapolitan Quartet* had sold 750,000 copies in the United States, 250,000 in the United Kingdom, and had been translated into 37 languages. In 2016, *Time Magazine* named Ferrante as one of the most influential people on the planet, while the *New Yorker* has defined her as 'a genius' and 'a titanic novelist'.<sup>23</sup> In 2017, HBO and Italian state broadcaster Rai collaborated to produce an international drama series based on the first novel *My Brilliant Friend*, which premiered on television in 2018. What has now become a cultural phenomenon under the name of 'Ferrante fever' has also earned the pseudonymous writer a place in a (hypothetical) contemporary canon of world literature.

How and to what extent, however, can the astonishing success of Ferrante's work be explained with reference to the actual features, and aesthetic value, of the novel(s)?<sup>24</sup> Before

<sup>21</sup> The conception of world literature I am proposing here draws also from Jane Hiddleston in 'Writing World Literature: Approaches from the Maghreb', *PMLA* 131.5 (2016): 1386–95. Hiddleston centres her discussion of world literature on examples of multilingual and intercultural creativity in contemporary postcolonial literature, challenging Robert Young's juxtaposition of world literature and postcolonial literature I have previously mentioned. Hiddleston focuses on the form of the works she analyses, and particularly on the role of language in these only apparently monolingual works, arguing that the 'worldliness of world literature may be intrinsic to the form of the work, not created by translators, critics, and readers' (1388).

<sup>22</sup> Although this is not the right place to discuss in detail Damrosch's theorization of world literature, it is important to note that he offers multiple, and at times problematic, definitions of it in *What Is World Literature?* (2013). In the Introduction to the volume, he already provides a second definition of world literature as opening 'multiple windows on the world' and/or comprising 'works that would serve as windows into foreign worlds' (14). This significant shift within the same page makes Damrosch's definition inconsistent: while the concept of 'windows on the world' conveys the idea of a diverse corpus of works that would somehow speak to/of a supposedly unitary world, the slightly different concept of 'windows into foreign worlds' does not only imply the recognition of a multiplicity of worlds but also seems to assume a specific (and domestic) point of view from which to look at other, different and foreign, worlds and works. Quite problematically, in my opinion, Damrosch's views here seem to further imply that what makes a work a world masterpiece is its ability to act as a window onto the (foreign) world(s).

<sup>23</sup> Joshua Rothman, 'Knausgaard or Ferrante?', *The New Yorker*, 25 March 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/knausgaard-or-ferrante>; Lauren Goff, 'Elena Ferrante', *Time*, 21 April 2016, <https://time.com/collection-post/4299844/elena-ferrante-2016-time-100/>.

<sup>24</sup> As I am touching upon the current Ferrante debate, I should stress that I am not interested here in speculating about possible external factors that would explain 'Ferrante fever' regardless of the features of her work. Therefore, my analysis does not examine the position of the author in the contemporary literary scene, her stance of anonymity as a possible marketing strategy, or the supposed contradiction between this desire for anonymity and the public and outspoken 'writing' figure that Ferrante has established for herself. These are undoubtedly

embarking on my own reading of *L'amica geniale* in order to provide a tentative answer to this question, it is worth noting that scholars' appreciation of Ferrante's work has not been unanimous. Stefano Jossa, in particular, while avoiding an explicit aesthetic judgement, has denied the suitability of Ferrante's work as an academic object of study: 'I romanzi della Ferrante potranno pure essere letterariamente bellissimi, ma l'Università avrebbe il dovere di lavorare su *oggetti di più largo respiro* per porre problemi culturali che potranno servire alle future generazioni come strumenti per riflettere sul presente e pensare le *alternative*' (my italics).<sup>25</sup> Jossa's remarks here are useful as a framework for my own reading of *L'amica geniale*. According to Jossa, Ferrante's writing lacks an essential characteristic that a literary work should possess in order to be admitted into an academic context, namely a far-reaching perspective which would enable its readers to think of alternatives to the present world. In contrast to Jossa's position, my comparative analysis of *L'amica geniale* and *La strada che va in città* shows how both works offer precisely those hints for an alternative that Jossa considers crucial for a literary work to qualify as such. Ferrante's novel and Ginzburg's story depict, and create, worlds that are changing, and whose changes are difficult to deal with, but also worlds that are unstable, in between tradition and modernity, and that, as such, open up the possibility for alternatives.

In order to show how these elements of uncertainty, instability, and openness emerge in the world(liness) of the texts, my analysis will focus in particular on the ways in which the two texts foreground a liminal position between the local and the global at three different levels: 1) in terms of the setting and focus of the two stories, in the oscillation between a precise locality and the world but also between particularity and universality; 2) within the stories, in the dichotomy that the main characters face between the local and the global, as well as between tradition and modernity; 3) in the linguistic and stylistic texture of the works, which seem to facilitate and resist translation at the same time, hence contributing to their global allure (and circulation) without erasing their local roots. By virtue of this condition of being between the local and the global, the texts in question ultimately respond to a conception of world literature that does not need to imply the loss of the local. On the contrary, world literature can promote what Florian Mussgnug has called 'responsible and responsive local sensitivity', if, in other words, it can become a way of paying renewed attention to the local through a planetary perspective.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Global Dimension of the Local***

Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale* and Natalia Ginzburg's *La strada che va in città* rely upon settings that are very localized, without being necessarily identifiable with a single, precise location. In Ferrante's novel, the story is set in a small neighbourhood in Naples, where the two female friends Elena and Lila live. Throughout the novel, the *rione* emerges in all its concrete characteristics, especially in its material reality of poverty, class difference, and

---

relevant questions, insofar as issues surrounding the publishing industry and the power struggles in the contemporary world literary market do provide a critical insight into the question of world literature as a system of cultural capital – a World Republic of Letters, in Pascale Casanova's conceptualization. These and similar questions have also at least partially been addressed both in academic contexts and, perhaps more widely and fiercely, in the press, thus creating a sort of battlefield in which Ferrante's devoted supporters defend the author's work and her right to anonymity against a whole line of detractors of her authorial position and her work.

<sup>25</sup> Stefano Jossa, 'Non si deve studiare la Ferrante all'Università', *Doppiozero*, 20 May 2017, <https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/non-si-deve-studiare-la-ferrante-alluniversita>

<sup>26</sup> In this intervention, which focuses on the potentiality of genre, in its transnational dimension, to mark cultural difference in our globalized literary world, Mussgnug draws from and elaborates on Spivak's distinction between the global and the planetary, where only the latter is able to account for the multiplicity inherent in our (global) world.



violence. Now an adult, the narrator Elena notes: 'Non ho nostalgia della nostra infanzia, è piena di violenza. [...] a me sarebbero piaciuti i modi gentili che predicavano la maestra e il parroco, ma sentivo che quei modi non erano adatti al nostro rione' (33). And yet, in spite of or perhaps thanks to these characteristics, the novel's central neighbourhood can be seen as a symbol of any enclosed space from which a person – and a woman, more specifically – needs to escape. The more entrapping its conditions become, the more urgent the need to flee it emerges, while the space itself loses its particularity and becomes simply associated with the suffocating conditions that define it and that Elena gives voice to: 'mi toglieva il fiato lo spazio compresso del cortile, delle palazzine, del rione' (54). According to Lucamante, Ferrante's '*rione* is difficult, but necessary, to part from in order to assert one's own identity' (2018: 32–3), so that, without completely losing its specificity, it also becomes the symbol of a wider condition of oppressiveness and frustration that women in the 1950s, in Italy as well as elsewhere, experienced.<sup>27</sup>

It is true that in the case of Ferrante the choice of Naples, and the specific image of the city that her work conveys, might be interpreted as strategic. Ferrante could be using the locality to please readers who like to learn about a world that is unfamiliar to them, thus adopting a strategy for which world literature is often criticized. It is the same strategy that Gloria Fisk sees at play in Pamuk's success on the global (and Westernized) literary market, the only difference being that in Ferrante's case the mechanism works within the Western (literary) world. Through the careful, and probably intentional, balance between a stereotypical and a foreignizing portrait of Naples that the novel foregrounds, the world that Ferrante depicts seems to rely upon what we might call a 'familiar unfamiliarity'.<sup>28</sup> In other words, Ferrante's Naples is familiar enough for an international audience to recognize and relate to, but it is also marked by a certain degree of unfamiliarity that preserves its allure. In this perspective, the peculiar geographical and ideological position of Southern Italy as a whole, crucially caught between Europe and the Mediterranean, modernity and tradition, progress and backwardness, also contributes to enhancing a common and misleading imaginary of the novel's setting. Somehow exotic, Mediterranean, far away, and backward, even though still part of Europe, Southern Italy, and Naples within it, is interesting and attractive precisely for this reason, and Ferrante might be playing with these qualities. De Rogatis rejects this interpretation of Ferrante's work and instead reads the *rione* as a 'universal suburb', highlighting how Ferrante 'rifiuta ogni lettura esotica di Napoli' while in fact pursuing 'uno smussamento degli elementi etnici più estremi, che rischiano di limitare in discorso all'interno di una particolarità esposta da sempre al pittoresco' (160). The balance between the universal and the particular is, indeed, quite subtle. However, it is precisely this balance, I believe, and the related impossibility of defining Ferrante's work as necessarily either local or global, that make it world literature.

In this dynamic balance of particularity and universality, Ferrante's Neapolitan *rione* resonates quite closely with the opening and main setting of Ginzburg's short story. In *La strada che va in città*, the young female protagonist, Delia, who is also again the narrator of her own story, longs to escape the unbearably poor conditions of her family life in a countryside

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Virginia Nicholson, *Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story of Women in the 1950s* (London: Viking, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> This mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity lies at the root of the conceptualization of world literature, starting from Goethe's appraisal of works that are able to operate along the three dimensions of *difference*, *similarity*, and the *like-but-unlike* compromise between the two. Damrosch reformulates this appraisal as a starting point for his own discussion and theorization of world literature (2013: 12).

setting that is as claustrophobic as Ferrante's *rione*.<sup>29</sup> Here, the precise location in which the story begins, and which plays a key role in its unfolding, is never revealed. It is enough for the reader to learn from the start that it is not a city setting, and that the space offers the protagonist no possibility of happiness, as Delia's own remarks make clear: 'mia sorella Azalea era sposata e viveva in città' [...]. Io non trovo niente di allegro nella nostra casa' (23). Thus, in Ginzburg as in Ferrante the setting can be local and global at the same time precisely because it resists localization. As Rachel Cusk writes about Ginzburg: 'no content is required to read her [...] yet her work is deeply practical and personal'.<sup>30</sup> Both Ferrante's *rione* and Ginzburg's small country village could be anywhere in the world insofar as they stand for, and reveal in concrete terms, an existential condition of dissatisfaction and oppressiveness.

The unsustainable situation of entrapment that the women face in the two works is also, however, what ultimately opens up the need for an alternative, and the possibility of imagining one. Elena, Lila, and Delia all undertake a struggle for emancipation that is central to the development of the two stories. In addressing the desire and the fight for women's emancipation, Ferrante's novel and Ginzburg's story manage to strike a subtle, and again strategic, balance between the individual and the collective, between the personal stories of the women characters and the wide historical background against which these stories are set. Daniel Schwarz has praised the ability of what he defines as Ferrante's 'epic novel' to include 'macrocosmic views of world politics and social change and microcosmic views of the ebbs and flows in individual lives' (287). Story and history are deeply intertwined here, and their interconnectedness reveals the worldliness of a work that is able to address global conditions from a local position.

The three women follow different paths, so that their trajectories only partially overlap, while the two works successfully convey the plurality of women's experiences in the 1950s. Although *L'amica geniale* is only the first instalment of the tetralogy, which means that the development of Elena's and Lila's lives cannot entirely be foreseen, the two adolescents discuss multiple times the means at their disposal to escape from their suffocating environment. Significantly, the terms of the conversation seem to oscillate between two main positions: The path to emancipation, which inevitably implies a social and economic upgrade, requires wealth, which in turn can be achieved through either education or marriage. If, in their childhood, both Elena and Lila seem to believe that 'bastava studiare e scrivere un libro' (66) to become rich, things change as they start to grow up. Whereas Elena progressively devotes herself to her personal acculturation, Lila ends up renouncing her literary ambitions, and 'la ricchezza, incarnandosi in Stefano' (245) leads her to a marriage whose shadows loom over her from her wedding day onwards.

The end of the first novel does not let us predict to what extent the two friends will ultimately be able to achieve their goals of emancipation. The ambiguity of the novel's title also serves to confuse the reader, who is unable at this point to assign the 'brilliant' label to either Lila or Elena. However, this unresolved and ambiguous dimension, in which Lila's and Elena's individual destinies still need to be written, reveals the possibility of alternatives to the women's current lives. Their struggle might or might not in the end be successful. Yet, the novel expresses a need for change that, rooted in Elena's and Lila's trajectories, also transcends the individual and acquires a universal resonance. As the singular experience merges into a collective condition, the Italian – and Neapolitan – novel becomes at the same time a

<sup>29</sup> For the setting of the story, Ginzburg admits to having taken inspiration from her own stay in the small village of Pizzoli, in the Abruzzi, where she lived for three years at the outbreak of the Second World War. However, there are no concrete elements in the story that would allow the reader to recognize the place.

<sup>30</sup> Rachel Cusk, 'Violent Vocation', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/violent-vocation-natalia-ginzburg/>.

global novel, a work of world literature insofar as it creates the possibility of a world beyond the one that the novel itself depicts.

In Ginzburg's story, the need for change and emancipation that Italian women experienced in the middle of the twentieth century assumes within a single character the same oscillatory and uncertain accents that Ferrante expresses through the split between her two female protagonists. In *La strada che va in città*, Delia struggles, and ultimately fails, to reconcile the two options that could provide her with an alternative to her current entrapping situation. Thanks to the influence of her friend Nini, who is in love with her and who seems to represent at first a positive means of escape, she gets a job in the city. Working in the urban environment alleviates the burden of her domestic life. In this sense, Delia's trajectory resembles Elena's path, as Elena also spends her summers working in the local stationery shop as a way of earning money to pay for her education. However, as a consequence of an unplanned pregnancy, Delia ends up accepting marriage as the only possibility that seems left to her, in a manner that actually recalls Lila's path. But Delia cannot hide her unhappiness in the way that Lila – as seen from Elena's perspective – seems to do: 'Adesso non desideravo più di sposarlo. [...] La notte prima del mio matrimonio non feci che piangere' (65; 68). Delia's ultimate condition of unhappiness and dissatisfaction marks the end of the short story, thus determining its circular structure and revealing the harsh reality of the challenges that women have to face within the patriarchal culture of the 1950s, in Italy and elsewhere.

### ***Trespassing Boundaries***

The subtle balance between the local and the global that characterizes the setting of Ferrante's and Ginzburg's works also acts within the stories, in the apparent dichotomy the protagonists face between the local and the global, both in strictly spatial terms – the *rione* and the countryside versus the city – and in their association with tradition and modernity, respectively.

In both works, this dichotomy materializes at first in the diverging paths that the two main women characters – Elena and Lila in Ferrante's novel, Delia and her sister Azalea in Ginzburg's story – seem to have followed. In the short Prologue to *L'amica geniale*, we learn that Elena is now living in Turin, whereas Lila 'non era mai uscita da Napoli in tutta la sua vita' (16).<sup>31</sup> The two friends' different attitudes towards the world that lies beyond the local space of their neighbourhood is foreseen in a crucial episode of their adolescence, in which together they attempt to push the boundaries of their restrictive environment. With a mix of temptation and fear, Elena and Lila trespass the limits imposed on them and cross the borders of the *rione*, leaving behind those same 'palazzine bianche' and 'cortile' (68) that have been oppressing Elena since her early childhood. As they walk towards the city, and the road becomes less and less familiar, it is Lila who, all of a sudden, turns around in an unexpected hurry. Elena simply finds herself 'poco convinta a correre nella direzione del rione' (73), precisely because, as she admits with some perplexity, Lila 'era voluta tornare dentro i confini del rione' (74). If, as Lucamante notes, *L'amica geniale* portrays 'the character's attachment to the *rione* as both a physical and mental form of submission to its laws' (2018: 31), the divergence between the two protagonists reveals from the start the alluring and at the same time terrifying need to cross the boundaries of that neighbourhood, so as to experience the larger world beyond it. Similarly, in *La strada che va in città* Delia's suffocating life in the countryside triggers her need to escape, which materializes in repeated visits to her sister Azalea, who, living an indolent city life, 'leggeva romanzi, o fumava, o telefonava al suo amante' (24).

<sup>31</sup> The Prologue functions as a frame for the rest of the novel and, as such, introduces Elena's own narration of the events of her childhood and adolescence many years after they occurred – as she herself reveals: 'Ho acceso il computer e ho cominciato a scrivere ogni dettaglio della nostra storia' (19).

In both Ferrante's novel and Ginzburg's short story the city, and the life associated with it, seem at the beginning fascinating and promising. After that first, unsuccessful attempt to escape the *rione*, Elena and Lila, now adolescent, finally make their way to Naples. At this point, their experience of the city is so intense that, as Elena notes, 'i confini del rione sbiadirono', is rapidly swept away by 'lo spazio enorme della città' (132), where 'tutto era nuovo', with a train station 'così moderna che arrivavano i Giapponesi apposta per studiarsela' (133). The unconstrained and modern look of the city strikes the narrator precisely because of its stark opposition to the local *rione* she comes from: 'Possibile che solo il nostro rione fosse così pieno di tensione e violenze, mentre il resto della città era radioso, benevolo?' (133). The city, in other words, seems initially to highlight even more, by contrast, the backward, oppressive, and violent nature of the *rione*.

Similarly, taking advantage of her visits to Azalea to walk around the city, in *La strada che va in città* Delia is overcome by a feeling of admiration for the freedom and luxury that characterize modern urban life: 'l'orchestra del caffè suonava e io guardavo con la mia amica i vestiti delle donne che passavano' (24). The fading memory of city life becomes for Delia even more alluring when, as a consequence of her unintended pregnancy, she is confined by her family in the tiny and very remote village in which her aunt lives. Here, trapped in the aunt's house, with no chance of passing through even the small gate that separates the vegetable garden at the back of the house from the village, Delia cannot help thinking about the city where 'si compravano le mandorle salate, i gelati, si guardavano le vetrine, [...] c'era Azalea che aspettava il suo amante' (53). The city promises all that a reclusive life in a country village precludes: comfort, idleness, and freedom.

However, as the stories unfold, the characters overcome the allure with which the space of the city dazzles them at first. Elena and Delia, in particular, get more and more acquainted with the city so as to reduce their sense of physical distance from it, while, paradoxically, becoming aware of a more profound kind of distance, which cannot be erased. This is an ultimate sense of not belonging, which is stronger than the feeling of connection supplied by physically inhabiting the city space. When Elena returns to the city, she still perceives this movement 'come passare un confine' (188). However, once traversed, this border is no longer faded and insignificant, but rather signals the passage into an 'umiliante diversità [...] un altro pianeta' (188). As Elena, Lila, and her group of friends from the *rione* get involved in a fight, Elena feels all the burden of the *rione* on her shoulders: 'Mi sentivo come se il rione si fosse allargato e avesse inglobato tutta Napoli, anche le vie della gente perbene' (192). If, as Schwarz notes, 'both Elena and her creator see Naples as metaphor for the world in which "the dream of unlimited progress is in reality a nightmare of savagery and death"' (302), its initial contrast with the small home neighbourhood loses its strength while the reality of the *rione* literally engulfs the larger world beyond it. A similar nightmare looms over Delia's destiny, once, after Nini's death and the birth of her undesired child, she finally settles into her new life in the city. However, this greatly longed-for life closely resembles the ultimate monotony of Azalea's, thus failing to provide Delia with the coveted happiness she had hoped for, as her words reveal: 'cominciai a vivere come Azalea. Passavo le giornate a letto e verso sera mi alzavo, mi dipingevo il viso, e uscivo fuori' (80). In both cases, then, the initial allure of the larger and modern world, as opposed to the apparent backwardness of the local, cannot hide the traps, false promises, and illusions that a rejection of the local in favour of an uncritical embrace of the global implies.

As both works give voice to the contradictions of modernity, the comparison between them significantly bridges the conceptual categories of modernism (to which Ginzburg's work might be seen to belong) and world literature (as applicable to Ferrante's work), implying the need for an expansion of the boundaries of both. If modernism, according again to the

WREC, 'ought to be conceptualised as a cultural formulation of resistance to the prevailing – indeed, the hegemonic – modes of capitalist modernisation in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe', world literature, in this perspective, must also be seen as a 'creature of modernity' (50). World literature, in other words, resumes and reconceptualizes a 'registration' of the world that modernist works had already undertaken. This link between modernism and world literature sustains the comparison between *L'amica geniale* and *La strada che va in città*, as two texts that, although belonging to distinct cultural and historical contexts, both aim to respond to the same impasse of modernity and, in doing so, to suggest the possibility of alternatives to this impasse.

Thus, the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, as well as between the local and the global, that both Ferrante's novel and Ginzburg's short story posit at the outset through the oppositions between their main women characters unravels in the development of the stories. If Elena's local space of the *rione* ultimately seems to invade the global space of the city, city life does not provide Delia with an antidote to her dissatisfaction and unhappiness. However, there is a crucial turning point in *La strada che va in città*, whose significance is also suggested by the title of the short story. At a time in which Delia is still unsure about her pregnant status – hence her destiny is yet to be defined – and she is heading back home after one of her city trips, she finds herself in a condition of liminality and suspension: 'non vedevo più la città, non vedevo ancora la nostra casa ed ero sola sulla strada vuota' (41). As Delia can no longer see the city, and cannot yet see her house in the countryside, her focus is just on the road, on the instability and uncertainty of the passage, which could offer alternatives to her current life: 'C'erano delle ragazze che andavano a scuola, andavano al mare d'estate, ballavano, scherzavano tra loro di sciocchezze. Perché non ero una di loro? Perché non era così la mia vita?' (41). This scene closely resonates with Elena and Lila's first trip to Naples, when they do not actually reach the city, as we have seen, but instead focus on the road that leads to it, 'la strada tutta dritta a perdita d'occhio' (71). Significantly, this uncertain condition allows Elena to experience happiness. She finds herself 'esposta all'ignoto con gioia' (71), as the uncertainty is what, for Elena as well as for Delia, still leaves open the possibility of a choice, of taking a different direction. The road then becomes a site where the nomadic subjectivity of the two female protagonists can be envisioned, a 'creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile', the local and the global, tradition and modernity, 'but within all these categories' (Braidotti 7).

In the centrality that they assign to these parallel episodes, Ferrante's novel and Ginzburg's short story both seem to endow with a special significance the moment of potentiality and uncertainty, in which, before the events get defined, an alternative can still be imagined. In this way, the two works might be seen as foregrounding what Christopher Holmes defines as an epistemology of the limit, which he applies pointedly to a reconceptualization of world literature. What Holmes proposes as a theory of world literature relies on a form of 'limit-thinking; a methodology that frees world literature from expectations of coverage and classification and revitalizes the term as a call to engage the literary text as thinking with, rather than of, the world' (574). In other words, what Holmes suggests here is an understanding of world literature not as a canon, but rather as a way 'of thinking that is in-process, in-common, and incomplete, an analogue to the necessary impossibility of knowing the world' (572). The limit here must not be intended, as Holmes further notes, as 'a limitation or boundary' but rather, I would add, as a fruitful condition of instability. Interpreted as such, the limit is what allows Elena and Delia to engage in a way of thinking that is 'made possible by limits' (Holmes 581), so as to imagine the world beyond these very limits and regardless of its actualization.

This act of imagination that Elena and Delia engage with at crucial turning points in their lives, in Cheah's terms with which we started, 'uncovers the world and opens up other possible



worlds'; however, these worlds are neither limited to a restricted localized space nor simply identified with the global space of the city beyond it. In both cases, the possibility of another world opens up precisely in the passage from one to the other, where the opposition between the two gets blurred and neither of them seems realized yet. In this perspective, *L'amica geniale* and *La strada che va in città* can also be seen as responding to Peter Carravetta's remarks on world literature as, 'at bottom, an experience of migration, that is to say, of transposition, a moving from place to place linguistically, existentially, socially[, where] the traveler brings worlds together, or at least links them' (269). The focus of Elena's and Delia's stories is on the movement from one world to the other, from the apparent local to the apparent global, in an attempt to bridge the two – although, in the end, one seems to merge into the other. What remains, then, is the space between, which configures itself as the only conceivable alternative and resistance to both the local and the global, from where 'a more fluid conception of the planet we inhabit' (Carravetta 269) could also emerge.

### ***The Productive Opacity of Language***

The resistance to a binary logic between the local and the global that we have noted at the levels of the setting and of the characters' own trajectories in Ferrante's novel and Ginzburg's short story finally reveals itself also in the linguistic and stylistic choices that the two works exhibit. Ferrante's language in *L'amica geniale* can definitely be seen as rooted in the local environment that the book describes. Throughout the novel, language contributes to the local characterization of the story through the use of certain regional words in place of the standard Italian terms and even of some specific words and expressions of the Neapolitan dialect.<sup>32</sup>

However, there is a particular linguistic choice that Ferrante makes in her novel that renders her language relatively easy to translate, and hence apparently more global than local. Ferrante's use of Neapolitan dialect is confined to a few words and/or isolated sentences. Although these terms and expressions do mark the locality of the work, they are not difficult to understand within the contexts in which they appear, so that they do not make the overall language of the novel either significantly regional or opaque. In this perspective, Ferrante's choice not to use dialect on a larger scale seems to make her work fit well into Rebecca Walkowitz's category of 'born translated' novels, in which the bilingualism – of Italian and Neapolitan, in this specific case – is not mimetic. *L'amica geniale*, then, could be seen as one of those works that have not only been 'written for translation', but also 'written as translations, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed' (Walkowitz 4). It is not by chance that readers of Ferrante's novel in translation tend to assume that the original Italian version includes dialect. There are, indeed, several passages in which the narrator explicitly notes the fact that some characters are speaking in dialect ('Lila ripete in dialetto' (52); 'Disse qualcosa in dialetto che non capii' (62), but no dialect appears in the text. This peculiar feature of Ferrante's work justifies Adam Kirsch's assertion that 'the use of Neapolitan dialect [...] throughout the series is a marker of class, education, and temperament' (95–6).<sup>33</sup> While it is true that Ferrante makes her narrator dis-

<sup>32</sup> Examples are 'il marchese' (98), 'friarielli' (106), 'piccerè' (134), 'chillu càntaro' (149), 'Hai sentito ca chillu strunz m'ha chiamato tàmmaro?' (190).

<sup>33</sup> As scholars have noted, dialect in Ferrante's novels, in its sporadic appearances or even just through the narrator's metalinguistic glosses, plays a key role in characterizing the social and historical context, marking spatial and social boundaries, and making the reader hear the 'sounds of Naples'. See, in particular, Jillian R. Cavanaugh, 'Indexicalities of Language in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: Dialect and Italian as Markers of Social Value and Difference', *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, edited by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 45–70; Chiara de Caprio, 'Spazi, suoni e lingue nel romanzo 'di Napoli', *Nazione Indiana*, 16 December 2017 <https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2017/12/16/spazi-suoni->

tinguish between Italian and dialect as a way to characterize better the people and the environments she portrays, she also firmly chooses not to make her characters speak in dialect. Thus, when Kirsch affirms that the use of dialect in the novel is 'a feature of the original that cannot easily be translated' (96), further pointing out how 'Ferrante, clearly, is not concerned about making her style effortlessly consumable around the world' (96), his remarks are not convincing.

This is not to conclude that Ferrante necessarily avoids dialect in order to facilitate translation. Indeed, the English translator of Ferrante's work, Ann Goldstein, believes that 'the obvious reason Ferrante doesn't use dialect is because many Italians wouldn't understand it'. Goldstein also notes that 'a second reason may be that [...] Neapolitan dialect is very much a spoken language, and if she [Ferrante] were writing it, there would be no point, in a way. It would lose the character that it has as a spoken language.'<sup>34</sup> This latter remark could perhaps also explain why the creators of the HBO television series based on *L'amica geniale* opted instead for an extensive use of dialect, which required the addition of subtitles for not only the English but also the Italian version. However, the opposite of what Kirsch posits cannot be completely denied either: There is a chance that Ferrante consciously chose not to use dialect precisely in order to make her work more 'consumable around the world', hence more global. And although Walkowitz's point that many novels now 'appear simultaneously or nearly simultaneously in multiple languages' (1–2) does not exactly apply to *L'amica geniale*, it might be worth considering that Europa Editions, the New York City-based sister press of Ferrante's Italian publishing house, Edizioni e/o, was created precisely with the intention of translating into English works published by Edizioni e/o, so as to make them immediately available for a global market.

Whereas the absence of dialect, then, can appear as a sign of the simplicity of Ferrante's language, the difficulty lies somewhere else. As Walkowitz notes with reference to the contemporary novels she analyses, multilingualism can also occur through 'narrating languages', where, in Adorno's conceptualization that Walkowitz borrows here, 'it may be foreign ideas or unusual syntax, rather than foreign diction, that create the impression of nonnative expression' (40). In Ferrante's novel, there are examples of unusual juxtapositions of words and questionable syntactical choices for which she has been criticized. While Schwartz points out that 'although Ferrante uses some strikingly brilliant metaphors, she is not a stylist [... and] her basic structural concept is not the elegant sentence', the journalist Annalisa Merelli is more critical of Ferrante's use of language. In her article on *Quartz*, significantly entitled 'Elena Ferrante's writing is better in English than in Italian', Merelli reports some examples of what she interprets as flaws in Ferrante's style that, according to her, the English version is able to overcome.<sup>35</sup> For instance, Merelli criticizes Ferrante's sentence: 'facendo insorgere immagini e parole', where, as she explains, the verb 'insorgere' usually refers to the occurrence of a problem and is not commonly associated with images and/or words. As a further example of Ferrante's odd constructions, Merelli cites the expression 'ampi cenni', where 'cenni' in Italian means hints, so that its juxtaposition with the adjective 'broad' might appear peculiar. Although in her translation of *L'amica geniale* Ann Goldstein chooses to normalize these (and no doubt other similar) expressions, so that in English they do not sound strange at all ('bringing to the surface images and words'; 'broad motions of her arms'), she must have

---

lingue-nel-romanzo-napoli/; Rita Librandi, 'Una lingua silenziosa: immaginare il dialetto negli scritti di Elena Ferrante', *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, 2 (2019): 385–98 DOI: 10.24425/kn.2019.128413.

<sup>34</sup> Katrina Dotson, 'The Face of Ferrante.' Interview with Ann Goldstein, *Guernica* (15 January 2016): <https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/the-face-of-ferrante/>.

<sup>35</sup> Annalisa Merelli, 'Ferrante's Writing is better in English than Italian', *Quartz*, 16 December 2015, <https://qz.com/573851/elena-ferrantes-writing-is-better-in-english-than-italian/>.

struggled both to understand their meaning and to find an appropriate way of translating them. In other words, these expressions do make translation difficult, and are thus, I believe, a sign of Ferrante's ultimate resistance to the immediate translatability – and global appeal – of her own work, and therefore as a form of untranslatability, in Emily Apter's conception of it. As we have seen, the (possibility of a) world that Ferrante creates in her novel is local and global at the same time, defined and constrained by traditional roles and boundaries, and yet also characterized by the allure of a modernity whose traps and pitfalls it cannot avoid revealing. The liminal and contradictory nature of such a world can only be expressed through a language that is likewise unstable and imperfect, and that itself works at the limits between the local and the global.

If we now shift our focus to the linguistic and stylistic characteristics of Ginzburg's writing as they emerge in *La strada che va in città*, we can understand the extent to which they differ from, but at the same time resonate with, Ferrante's own choices. Ginzburg's prose does not indulge in any of the odd constructions and unusual word choices for which Ferrante has been criticized. On the contrary, in the clarity of the language and in the mastery and control over the syntactical structure of the sentences, Ginzburg's text evinces the elegance that Schwartz is unable to find in Ferrante's work. The opening paragraph of the short story may serve as a good example of this:

‘Il Nini abitava con noi fin da quando era piccolo. Era figlio d'un cugino di mio padre. Non aveva più i genitori ed avrebbe dovuto vivere con il nonno, ma il nonno lo picchiava con una scopa e lui scappava e veniva da noi. Finché il nonno morì e allora gli dissero che poteva stare sempre a casa’ (23).

Here a perfectly harmonious syntactical rhythm is created through the encapsulation of a single longer phrase, which also contains the only adversative clause, within the otherwise short and incisive sentences. Moreover, neither adjectives nor adverbs are used to embellish plain word choices in standard Italian.

As the second paragraph makes clear, the whole story is told from the perspective of the sixteen-year-old Delia, so that a certain simplicity of language and stylistic structures is perhaps justified by this specific point of view – whereas the narrator in *L'amica geniale* is a mature Elena who, as the reader learns throughout the story, is now also a professional writer. However, Ginzburg's linguistic choices cannot be entirely explained as mimetic of Delia's own voice and thoughts. In the example quoted above, for instance, the verb ‘picchiare’, although standard Italian, is definitely a polished and formal term as opposed to the commoner ‘menare’ or ‘bastonare’ that one would expect here, given the young girl's perspective. Thus, this particular instance indicates Ginzburg's general preference for an uncomplicated and yet refined language and style, which would be elegant and highly understandable at the same time. As Margaret Drabble notes, ‘Ginzburg's prose has been praised for its “limpid ease”, its “absolute clarity” and its “accessibility”’, which, one could argue, also make her work easily translatable.<sup>36</sup>

From this perspective, it is hard to agree with Parks' opinion, which gave rise to our discussion, that Ginzburg is one of those writers who will not find a place in the global literary market because, in light of the rise of world literature, ‘what seems doomed to disappear, or at least to risk neglect, is the kind of work that revels in the subtle nuances of its own language and literary culture, the sort of writing that can savage or celebrate the way this or that

<sup>36</sup> Rachel Cusk, ‘Violent Vocation’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/writers-vocation-natalia-ginzburg/>.

linguistic group really lives'<sup>37</sup>. The opposite of what Parks states here might actually be true. If Ginzburg is going to find a place in the global literary market, as recently seems to be the case (Parks was writing his article in 2010), it is because the 'subtle nuances' of her language and literary culture can actually express the way in which both her linguistic group, that is, Italian speakers, and a much wider cultural group of people experience the world. This is also one of the reasons behind Ferrante's success. It is not by chance that the number of English translations of Ginzburg's work has recently increased, and, having looked at both Ferrante's and Ginzburg's language, we can affirm that translating the latter is certainly easier than translating the former. In fact, Ginzburg's writing does not seem either to rely on any of those 'obstacles to international comprehension' that, according to Parks, writers of world literature would avoid on purpose so as to allow their work to travel beyond their national boundaries.

Rather, both Ferrante's and Ginzburg's work have a resonance that goes beyond the limits of their national and linguistic boundaries precisely because the worlds they describe, and the language they use to describe them, also transcend these limits. The comparative analysis of *L'amica geniale* and *La strada che va in città* has revealed the two works' ultimate resistance to easy categorization in terms of locality and globality, tradition and modernity, and the way they hint at the possibility of a world that lies at the threshold between the two. These are, I believe, the characteristics for which Ferrante's work deserves to be praised as world literature, where the 'effetto transculturale' of her novels cannot be entirely attributed to 'una trama ben confezionata e una buona operazione di marketing' (Cavarero 13). Insofar as it shares this transcultural effect that Cavarero describes, Ginzburg's work should also be included in the same category, and finally achieve the recognition it deserves.

## References

- Bond, Emma. 'Modern Languages Open comparative literature launch issue.' *Modern Languages Open*, 1: 1–5, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.234>
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. 2nd ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Carravetta, Peter. 'The Canons of World Literature.' *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. Edited by Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012, pp. 264–72.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Cheah, Pheng. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374534>
- Chow, Rey. 'The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective.' *ELH*, 71(2): 289–311, 2004. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2004.0022>
- Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Deckard, Sharae, et al. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5949/liverpool/9781781381892.001.0001>
- De Rogatis, Tiziana. *Elena Ferrante: Parole chiave*. Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2018.
- Ferrante, Elena. *L'amica geniale*. Rome: E/O, 2011.
- Fisk, Gloria. *Orhan Pamuk and the Good of World Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/fisk18236>

<sup>37</sup> Tim Parks, 'The Dull New Global Novel', *The New York Review of Books*, 9 February 2010, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/>.

- Ginzburg, Natalia. 'La strada che va in città'. *Cinque romanzi brevi e altri racconti*. Turin: Einaudi, 2005, pp. 21–81.
- Heise, Ursula K., et al., eds. *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315227405>
- Hiddleston, Jane. 'Writing World Literature: Approaches from the Maghreb'. *PMLA*, 131(5): 1386–95, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1386>
- Holmes, Christopher. 'The Limits of World Literature.' *Literature Compass*, 13(9): 572–84, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12338>
- Lucamante, Stefania. *A Multitude of Women: The Challenges of the Contemporary Italian Novel*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442688667>
- Lucamante, Stefania. 'Undoing Feminism: The Neapolitan Novels of Elena Ferrante.' *Italica: Bulletin of the American Association of Teachers of Italian*, 95(1): 31–49, 2018.
- Melas, Natalie. *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- Moretti, Franco. 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 54–68, 2000.
- Mussnug, Florian. 'Planetary Figurations: Intensive Genre in World Literature.' *Modern Languages Open*, 1: 1–12, 2018.
- Papadima, Liviu, David Damrosch, and Theo D'Haen, eds. *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042032828>
- Pinto, Isabella. 'Intervista ad Adriana Cavarero\*. Filosofia della narrazione e scrittura del sé: primi appunti sulla scrittura di Elena Ferrante.' *Testo&Senso*, 17: 1–14, 2016.
- Schwarz, Daniel R. *Reading the Modern European Novel since 1900: A Critical Study of Major Fiction from Proust's Swann's Way to Ferrante's Neapolitan Tetralogy*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118680650>
- Thomsen, Mads R. *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/walk16594>
- Wehling-Giorgi, Katrin. 'Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: Writing Liminality.' *Allegoria*, 73: 204–10, 2016.
- Young, Robert. 'World literature and postcolonialism.' *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. Edited by Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012, pp. 213–22.

**How to cite this article:** Caserta, S 2019 World Literature and the Italian Literary Canon: From Elena Ferrante to Natalia Ginzburg. *Modern Languages Open*, 2019(1): 18 pp. 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.272>

**Published:** 19 December 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**Journal:** *Modern Languages Open* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.

**OPEN ACCESS** 